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BUILDING THEORY AND EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE ABOUT PUBLIC SERVICE MOTIVATION

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The motivation of public servants has long been a topic of public concern, debate, and scholarly interest. Recent developments give the topic new prominence. One is the “global public management revolution” (Kettl 2005), driven by governments’ search for continuously higher levels of productivity, service orientation, and accountability. Another development is the consistent failure of financial incentive schemes (Perry, Mesch, and Paarlberg 2006) that were adapted from the private sector beginning in the late 1970s. A third development, given impetus by the first two, is increasing attention to the merits of bureaucracy as an institution and normative order (Olsen 2006). The intersection of these developments helps account for the growth of scholarly interest in public service motivation.

A long-standing problem in research about motivation is that it has been concentrated on industrial and business organizations (Perry and Porter 1982; Kelman 2005). The goal of this symposium is to highlight research that is conscious of the public context for motivation and intentional about incorporating public institutions into theory development and empirical research.

THE ORIGINS AND MEANING OF PUBLIC SERVICE MOTIVATION

The meaning of public service motivation varies across disciplines and fields, but its definition has a common focus on motives and action in the public domain that are intended to do good for others and shape the well-being of society. We construe public service motivation as referring to individual motives that are largely, but not...
exclusively, altruistic and are grounded in public institutions. We briefly discuss three distinct approaches to this research.

Institutionally Grounded Behaviors

In fields such as public administration, public management, and political science, public service motivation is used to refer to mechanisms unique to public institutions that energize and direct behavior. Perry and Wise (1990) initiated research about public service motivation to formalize what they observed was, de facto, a long-standing assumption about public service. Quoting Elmer Staats (1988), former comptroller general of the United States, they noted that many public administration scholars believed in a public service ethos that set public servants apart from counterparts in other institutions. Perry and Wise (1990) therefore defined public service motivation as “an individual’s predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and organizations” (p. 368). They identified a typology of motives associated with public service that included rational, norm-based and affective motives. Perry (1996) later developed a measurement scale that reduced the typology of motives empirically to four dimensions: attraction to public policy making, commitment to the public interest and civic duty, compassion, and self-sacrifice.

In subsequent analysis of public service motivation and government effectiveness, Rainey and Steinbauer (1999) offer a more global definition of public service motivation. They associate the construct with altruism by defining public service motivation as “a general, altruistic motivation to serve the interests of a community of people, a state, a nation or humankind” (p. 20). The Rainey and Steinbauer definition is similar to Brewer and Selden (1998), who defined the concept as “the motivational force that induces individuals to perform meaningful public, community, and social service” (p. 417), emphasizing its behavioral implications and applicability beyond the public sector.

The most recent effort to define public service motivation emanates from the research of Vandenabeele (2007) in Europe. Vandenabeele (2007) defines public service motivation as “the belief, values and attitudes that go beyond self-interest and organizational interest, that concern the interest of a larger political entity and that motivate individuals to act accordingly whenever appropriate” (p. 547). The primary departure of this definition from others is the addition of values as a component of institutional identity.

Altruism

Although public administration and public management scholars have associated altruism with public service motivation, sociologists and social psychologists who study altruism have not, as far as we know, invoked the term public service motivation. Piliavin and Charnig (1990) observe that altruism has traditionally been defined in terms of costs, but they argue that motives should be central to its
definition. They write, “We have chosen to adopt a largely motive-based definition of altruism as behavior costly to the actor involving other-regarding sentiments; if an act is or appears to be motivated mainly out of a consideration of another’s needs rather than one’s own, we call it altruism” (p. 30).

Although altruism scholars do not associate it with public service motivation, economists have connected the concepts. Public service motivation has been used by economists as “code” for altruism, meaning the willingness of individuals to engage in sacrificial behaviors for the good of others without reciprocal benefits for themselves. Patrick François titled his 2000 study “Public Service Motivation as an Argument for Government Provision.” What François (2000) meant by public service motivation was employees providing “effort out of concern for the impact of that effort on a valued social service” (p. 275). In his research on public servant motivation and policy design, the economist Julian Le Grand (2003), after reviewing relevant literature, including research about public service motivation, concludes that “it is hard to dispute the view that altruistic motivations are prevalent among the providers of public services” (p. 35). Thus, economists have fairly consistently associated public service motivation and altruism.

**Prosocial Behavior**

Unlike some economists, organizational behavior scholars do not use public service motivation and, in fact, seldom use altruism to refer to motivations in organizational, especially work, contexts. Organizational behavior scholars instead group behaviors that might be construed as altruistic under the rubric of prosocial behaviors, which encompasses a broad category of behaviors. Brief and Motowidlo (1986) define prosocial behavior in organizational settings as

Behavior which is (a) performed by a member of an organization, (b) directed toward an individual, group, or organization with whom he or she interacts while carrying out his or her organizational role, and (c) performed with the intention or promoting the welfare of the individual, group, or organization toward which it is directed (p. 711).

Brief and Motowidlo note that this definition is broad and others have suggested narrower definitions, usually involving reference to an actor’s motives. Walster and Piliavin (1972), for instance, suggest that the definition include that the act is voluntary and without expectations of return.

**Summary**

We believe the commonalities among the research traditions identified above are far more important than disciplinary differences. Common among these traditions is the importance accorded to other-regarding orientations. The scope of who the “other” is varies from individuals, to organizations, to society at large. Aside from
differences in units of analysis, however, we know that the scientific foundations for public service motivation run deep throughout many of the social and behavioral sciences (Koehler and Rainey 2008).

One way to think about the range of related, other-regarding constructs discussed here is that they are nested within a hierarchy of constructs, i.e., public service motivation is a specific expression of prosocial, other-oriented motives, goals, and values. Public service motivation understood either as institutionally unique motives associated with public service (Perry and Wise 1990), or beliefs and values that transcend self and organizational interests on behalf of a larger political entity (Vandenabeele 2007), could be conceived as a subset, for instance, of the overarching idea of altruism. The hierarchical relationship between public service motivation and altruism can be inferred directly from Rainey and Steinbauer’s (1999) definition of public service motivation.

Another way to conceive the relationships among altruism, prosocial behavior, and public service motivation is as complements to one another. Although exchanges across disciplines and constructs have been limited, the scholarship now being conducted about related constructs in many fields creates significant opportunities for cross-fertilization. In addition, it may be premature to assume that public service motivation should be nested within an array of related constructs. It is conceivable, for instance, that rational self-interest plays a much larger role in understanding public service motivation or that the nature of motivation varies by context. Another reason for caution about the relationships among related, other-regarding concepts is the problem of attribution. Behaviors that are attributed by scholars as prosocial or public service may, in fact, fail to capture the real intent of the actor. If this is the case, then nesting public service motivation within a hierarchy of constructs may be premature. Thus, we believe thinking in terms of construct complementarity could be fruitful (Perry and Hondeghem 2008).

These two paths—nested hierarchies and complementarity—are not mutually exclusive. We would, in fact, strongly encourage scholars who identify with one path to give more attention to the other. This would increase cross-fertilization among different streams of research.

PUBLIC SERVICE MOTIVATION RESEARCH

Public service has represented both an idea and an ideal dating to ancient civilizations (Horton 2008). Philosophers and behavioral scientists have examined the moral significance of public service, why people enter public service, and what attracts them to public service work. Some classical studies identified a bureaucratic personality, arguing that people with certain traits were attracted to public service (Lasswell 1930); others, like Merton (1940), argued that behavior is learned rather than the result of personal traits. Alternative views claimed that people enter public service out of a sense of duty and responsibility to serve the common good or the public interest (Bridges 1950; Mosher 1968). All of the aforementioned perspectives provided impetus for research on public service motivation.
It was not until the 1980s that theory and empirical research on public service motivation began to emerge in public management and the 1990s before it was more fully developed. Perry and Wise (1990) offered the first conceptual definition. Perry (1996) next developed an instrument to measure public service motivation and, later, explanations for its origins and antecedents (Perry 1997; Perry 2000). In the past two decades, scholars have built upon these foundations. Figure 1 presents annual and cumulative counts of public service motivation articles and conference papers since 1995. It shows the rapid growth of scholarly research. Not transparent from Figure 1, but also important, is that the geographic scope of the research has expanded. Although most of the initial research on public service motivation was done in the United States, research now encompasses Europe, Asia, and Australia.

In the forthcoming book, Motivation in Public Management: The Call of Public Service (Perry and Hondeghem 2008), we assess the state of theory and research about public service motivation. The book is the result of extensive collaboration between American and European scholars. What we know about public service motivation can be summarized around five themes: constructs, incidence, antecedents, outcomes, and organizational systems.

With respect to the focal construct, research has shown that public service motivation is developing as a reasonably robust, complex, theory-based construct. It is a multi-dimensional construct with an overarching meaning, referring to other regarding orientations. It is distinct from work-related constructs.

Public service motivation is found to be higher among employees working in the public than in the private sector. This is consistent with theories stressing the institutional basis of public service motivation. Although public service behavior is higher in the public sector, this does not mean that it is absent in private organizations. It might, however, take other forms, such as organizational citizenship behavior. Evidence for public service motivation extends across a range of countries. The dimensions of public service motivation, however, are not necessarily universal.

The research on antecedents reports that the most robust socio-demographic antecedents of public service motivation are education, gender, and age. This research also supports the importance of socialization by parents, religious institutions and professional organizations. Employee experiences in work organizations also play roles in fostering and sustaining public service motivation.
Outcomes associated with public service motivation involve four broad categories: behavior in the public square, organizational membership, role performance, and episodic performance. Research has shown that public service motivation has an impact on these different outcomes. Participation in civic and other organizations increases with public service motivation. With respect to membership, public service motivation appears to influence the attraction-selection-retention cycle. Ethical behavior, which is a type of role performance, is also positively associated with public service motivation. Episodic performance is the arena about which we know the least. Research has shown a positive relationship between individual and organizational performance, but the measures of performance have often been self-reports.

Evidence has accumulated that organizational systems such as incentive structures and public service motivation are related. Organizations that rely on public service motivation are less likely to depend on utilitarian incentives to manage individual performance effectively. This is supported by research on motivation crowding, which shows that using extrinsic incentives can lower motivation among employees with high levels of intrinsic motivation. This is an important finding for public sector organizations as performance-related pay has been regarded as an important strategy of modernization in the context of new public management.

Despite growth of research in recent years, many ambiguities, gaps, and uncertainties remain in our understanding of public service motivation. Two tracks of a research agenda on public service motivation can be identified (Perry and Hondeghem 2008). The first track involves how the study of other-regarding orientations in disciplines outside public management and administration can help to close gaps in our knowledge about public service motivation and vice versa. Research on public service motivation raises general issues that are relevant for all disciplines dealing with motivation of employees in organizations. Important questions associated with this research track are: how do public service motives interact with other motives; how can we account for individual differences; how stable or changeable is public service motivation; and how is public service motivation linked to related constructs?

The second track involves priorities for public service motivation research in public management and administration. Among these priorities are strengthening the public service motivation construct and its measurement, articulating key institutional assumptions about public service motivation, exploring the relation between public service motivation and performance, studying public service motivation in different settings, and improving the practice of public management.

This symposium contributes in significant ways to this research agenda. An important theme in several articles deals with the concept of public service motivation and its relation to other constructs such as organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and interpersonal citizenship behavior. Another theme deals with organizational practices, for example, job design, leadership, and financial incentives, which can enhance or decrease public service motivation. Several articles explore person-environment fit, which is the alignment between individual motives and organizational incentives. Several symposium contributions also attend to the
relation between public service motivation and organizational outcomes, such as performance and quality of work.

THE SYMPOSIUM CONTRIBUTIONS

The seven studies assembled for this symposium reflect the diversity of public service motivation research that we discussed above. One noteworthy dimension of diversity among these studies is that they cover five different countries: Australia, Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, and the United States. The first article by Bram Steijn, “Person-Environment Fit and Public Service Motivation,” addresses the classic issue of how a person’s predispositions affect behavior. Steijn draws upon theories of person-environment fit to assess the relationships between fit and several outcomes, including vocational choice, job satisfaction, and intent to leave. His analysis of a Dutch sample shows that workers with high fit between their level of public service motivation and environment are more satisfied and less inclined to leave their job and the organization they work for than workers without such a fit. Another finding supportive of predictions from person-environment fit theory is that private sector workers with high levels of public service motivation are inclined to look for a job in the public sector.

Lotte Bøgh Andersen and Thomas Pallesen investigate the effects of financial incentives on intrinsic motivation in “Not Just for the Money? How Financial Incentives Affect the Number of Publications at Danish Research Institutions.” Andersen and Pallesen turn to research from economics (Frey 1997) that is associated with the study of both altruism and intrinsic motivation. They investigate how the introduction of financial incentives to publish affects the number of publications at 162 Danish research institutions.

If financial incentives affect levels of intrinsic motivation, are there other interventions that have similar effects? In “Employees Without a Cause: The Motivational Effects of Prosocial Impact in Public Service,” Adam M. Grant shows that job designs also affect prosocial motivations. He focuses on how making a difference in other people’s lives can influence motivation. In a longitudinal quasi-experiment, a group of fundraising callers serving a public university met a fellowship student who benefited from the funds raised by the organization. A full month later, these callers increased significantly the number of pledges and amount of donation money they obtained, whereas callers in a control group did not change on these measures.

In “Organizational Influences, Public Service Motivation, and Work Outcomes: An Australian Study,” Jeannette Taylor follows up on several themes addressed in the first three articles of the symposium. She looks at the influence of organizational factors—intrinsic rewards, extrinsic rewards, work relations with management, and work relations with co-workers—on the relationship between public service motivation and job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Using the 2005 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, a national sample of 2,200 employees in the Australian public and private sectors, Taylor finds a direct association between
public service motivation and work outcomes. Organizational rewards and a public-
service-motivation-fit variable also have significant effects on work outcomes, but
the moderating effects of organizational factors on the relationships between public
service motivation and work outcomes could not be confirmed.

Sanjay Pandey, Bradley Wright, and Donald Moynihan seek to fill a gap in what
we know about relationships between two constructs in “Public Service Motivation
and Interpersonal Citizenship Behavior in Public Organizations: Testing a Prelimi-
nary Model.” They observe that public service motivation has been linked to desir-
able attitudes and behaviors both inside organizations and in the wider society. They
observe that what we know about whether public service motivation matters to
citizenship behavior internal to the organization is quite limited. They test direct
and indirect relationships between individual levels of public service motivation
and interpersonal citizenship behavior using a structural equation model. They find
that public service motivation has a direct and positive effect on interpersonal cit-
izenship behavior in public organizations, even when accounting for the significant
role of co-worker support.

Sung Min Park and Hal Rainey take up an issue of importance for improving
public management, which is the influence of leadership and motivation on job sat-
sisfaction, perceived performance, quality of work, and turnover intentions. In
“Leadership and Public Service Motivation in U.S. Federal Agencies,” Park and
Rainey analyze responses from 7,000 federal employees to the 2000 Merit Principles
Survey. They find that the combination of high transformation-oriented leadership
and high public-service oriented motivation has the strongest positive relation with
organizational outcomes. Their analysis indicates that transformation-oriented
leadership operates by increasing empowerment, clarifying goals, and stimulating
public-service oriented motivation.

In the final article of the symposium, “Development of a Public Service Motiv-
atation Measurement Scale: Corroborating and Extending Perry’s Measurement
Scale,” Wouter Vandenabeele gives special attention to strengthening measurement
of the construct. His article evaluates a measurement instrument developed in a
non-US setting, Belgium, based upon survey responses from 3,500 Flemish civil
servants. Some of Vandenabeele’s items differ from those originally developed by
Perry (1996), but the factorial structure of the original measurement instrument
remains intact. He finds evidence, however, that an additional dimension, “demo-
cratic governance,” could supplement the other dimensions of existing measurement
instruments.

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